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SUBJECT: KUWAIT HOSTS ISLAM MODERATION CONFERENCE

Ref: A) Kuwait 475

B) 05 Kuwait 5283

¶1. Summary: Kuwait's Ministry of Awqaf [endowments] and Islamic Affairs hosted a conference, "We and the Other," on March 6-8, 2006 to emphasize tolerance and to discourage extremism. During the opening session, Kuwait's Islamic Affairs Minister said that the true nature of Islam is one of moderation. The highest-profile speaker, Shaykh Tantawi of the Al-Azhar university in Cairo, called dialogue and mutual understanding a cornerstone of the Islamic faith. This conference was the latest effort undertaken by the GOK, in part through the Islamic Affairs Ministry and the "High Committee for the Enforcement of Moderation," to confront extremism and encourage moderation in Kuwaiti society. Ambassador LeBaron attended the opening session. End Summary.

¶2. As part of Kuwait's strategy to combat extremism and to reinforce moderation in its population, the Ministry of Awqaf [endowments] and Islamic Affairs hosted a three-day conference, "We and the Other," March 6-8. The conference brought together international Islamic religious leaders to discuss the need to reinforce tolerance as an Islamic precept and the importance of inter-faith dialogue. The highest profile speaker was the Shaykh of Cairo's Al-Azhar university, Shaykh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi. In addition to Islamic leaders, Ambassador LeBaron, the Cultural Affairs Officer, the Information Specialist and other members of the diplomatic corps attended the opening session of the conference.

¶3. The GOK's efforts to encourage moderation support Embassy MPP counterterrorism goals and efforts to promote further democratization. The conference organizers outlined four goals for the gathering, to:

- a. find common ground in the creed, ethics, and culture and reach a shared consensus on these values;
- b. encourage and enrich a culture of dialogue based on respect for others, and openness to differences in opinion;
- c. reconfirm moderate Islamic values, and expand their application to education; and
- d. find common values with others that deepen and strengthen shared economic and social ties with the rest of the world.

Islamic Affairs Minister: Islam is for Moderation

¶4. Opening the conference, Dr. Abdullah Al-Maatouq, Kuwait's Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, who was recently also appointed as Minister of Justice (ref A), stressed that the conference aimed to demonstrate that Islam is a moderate and tolerant faith. He argued that the conference would help portray the true image of Islam as a faith of moderation. He also hoped the conference would change public opinion about the relationship among people from different religions, from a perception of strife between cultures to cooperation and mutual action between cultures. He said, "Islam tells us that co-existence between peoples is based on

mutual understanding and always seeks common denominators with the other."

Shaykh Tantawi: Dialogue as a Cornerstone of Faith

15. The highest-profile speaker, Shaykh Tantawi of Al-Azhar in Cairo, stressed that Islam, the Qur'an and Sunnah (actions of the Prophet Muhammad) provide clear examples of how to deal with "the other," that there is no compulsion in religion (quoting the Qur'an), and that "dialogue is a cornerstone in our faith as the Almighty used dialog even with Satan himself." He also pointed out that "the other" could include non-Muslims as well as Muslims with deviant views. Shaykh Tantawi underlined the necessity of dialogue and mutual understanding between cultures, using the Quranic explanation of the reason that God created nations: "so that they may know one another."

16. Other conference speakers included the representative of the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISISCO), Dr. Abdelaziz Al-Jarallah; conservative member of the Kuwaiti Parliament, Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaei; Egyptian Mufti Ali Jumu'ah; and Sudanese Awqaf Minister Esam Al-Bashir. Non-Muslim speakers included Kuwaiti Bishop Amanuel Ghareeb and German professor Meklosh Morany. Some of the Muslim speakers criticized the West for not respecting the faith and culture of Muslims, citing the Danish cartoons as an example.

17. After meeting with conference participants, Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah told local reporters, "Islam is a religion of peace and Muslims should adhere to moderation."

Kuwait's Efforts at Confronting Extremism

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18. The "We and the Other" conference is part of Kuwait's long-term strategy of confronting Islamic extremism. The conference, under the patronage of Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammed Al-Sabah, was co-sponsored by the Islamic Affairs Ministry and by the government-established "High Committee to Enforce Moderation." As part of an ongoing effort to strengthen mutual understanding by targeting Islamic and non-Islamic audiences, the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs is producing a documentary film on the biography of the Prophet Mohammed for western audiences. EmbOffs are scheduled to attend a screening of the film, a work-in-progress, on March 22.

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